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TAGS: PREL PGOV GG RS

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: STEINMEIER FAILS TO GET RUSSIAN SUPPORT FOR DIRECT TALKS, BUT RUSSIA DOES NOT RULE THEM OUT

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Alice G. Wells.
Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Despite FM Lavrov's positive press spin about German FM Steinmeier's meetings in Moscow July 18, German colleagues characterized the trip as a "failure," and said Steinmeier made no progress in securing Russian support for direct Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations on security issues in Berlin at the end of the month. MFA told us July 21 that Lavrov and Steinmeier had agreed that, within the framework of the Group of Friends, the first step would be to get agreement on a UNSC Presidential Statement. Such a Statement would be a "good basis" for further work of the Friends, including the possibility of a meeting later in the summer in Berlin with the Georgians and Abkhazians to sign a non-use of force pledge. The MFA reiterated to us that Russia's position had not changed: such a pledge, together with withdrawal of Georgian forces from Kodori, were necessary first steps, without preconditions. End summary.

MFA Spins Visit Positively

¶2. (SBU) Following Steinmeier's visit, the MFA issued a relatively positive statement saying that the German proposal was "well-intentioned," and would be discussed further within the Friends' group. Lavrov asserted that the plan began with the "absolute priority items" of signing of a non-use of force agreement, and withdrawal of troops from Kodori. A subsequent press announcement underscored that these "first elements" needed to be achieved "in internationally recognized formats," reaffirmed Russian appreciation for German efforts, and called for resumption of talks in the Joint Consultative Commission as the only channel for discussing resolution of South Ossetia. A statement on Medvedev's site also underscored that a no-first use pledge and withdrawal from Kodori would open up other steps in the negotiating process.

Germans Say Reality Much More Negative

¶3. (SBU) German colleagues told us that following a "polite Georgian rebuff" in Tbilisi and a "rude Bagapsh reception" (the latter of which Steinmeier characterized as "fruitless"), Steinmeier had pressed Lavrov and Medvedev to support the proposed Berlin meeting at the working level. Lavrov told Steinmeier the initiative would fail. While praising the last Friends' meeting, Lavrov said the basic problem was that Georgia did not keep its promises, and cited the "agreement" between Medvedev and Saakashvili in St. Petersburg on a basic exit strategy for Abkhazia -- the need for dialogue, withdrawal from Kodori, and signing of a non-use of force pledge. Lavrov complained that "nothing happened." Two subsequent phone calls resulted in the agreement for Medvedev and Saakashvili to meet in Sochi, but Lavrov again charged Saakashvili with not being prepared to fulfill his promise. The meeting in Berlin, Lavrov stressed,

would be in "complete contradiction" to the higher-level Medvedev-Saakashvili initiative. Lavrov also reiterated Russian objections to elevating the return of IDPs to the same level as the security issue; rejected Georgian claims of 500,000 IDPs; and resurrected purported Shevardnadze statements to Russia that all the refugees that wanted to return had done so.

¶4. (SBU) German colleagues told us that Lavrov also complained that Russia's initiative had not received support in New York, and reiterated that the GOR was talking directly to Saakashvili and had its own proposals in play. Lavrov was irritated by U.S. "roadblocks," including insistence on linking IDPs and security; downplaying of Kodori, and belief that the security situation there was "under control"; and push for a NATO Membership Action Plan for Georgia. Medvedev's message was the same, German colleagues said.

MFA Presses for New York Action

¶5. (C) MFA CIS Deputy Director Semyon Grigoriev told us July 21 that Steinmeier had told Lavrov he had not expected the effort to get agreement to the German plan to be so difficult. He had encountered "completely conflicting" positions in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Georgia had insisted on return of refugees and IDPs, whereas Abkhazia had refused to accept such return, and had pressed for a non-use of force pledge and full withdrawal of Georgian forces from Kodori without preconditions.

¶6. (C) Grigoriev said Russia had not rejected Germany's three-stage proposal. Lavrov supported it "strategically," but believed that "tactically," the first step needed to be unity of the Friends' group, as evidenced by a Presidential Statement in the UN Security Council. Grigoriev said Lavrov and Steinmeier had agreed to seek such a Statement. The GOR saw it as a good basis for further work of the Friends, including a possible meeting of the Friends, Georgia, and Abkhazia in Berlin to sign a non-use of force pledge later in the summer. Grigoriev said such a UNSC Statement should be agreed by the Friends, but did not need Georgian or Abkhazian approval first. Grigoriev reiterated that Russia's position remained unchanged: non-use of force pledge and withdrawal of forces from Kodori had to precede other possible steps.

Comment

¶7. (C) German colleagues believe the more positive spin in the MFA statement was designed to support Steinmeier personally, rather than indicate support for the plan, with the GOR preferring the Abkhaz and Georgians to take the public fall for complicating the German diplomatic initiative.

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